

# Strategic Currents In North American Anarchism

by Christopher Day



## STRATEGIC CURRENTS IN NORTH AMERICAN ANARCHISM

### Introduction

This article has two parts. The first is a discussion of what I see as the main strategic currents within the anarchist movement. The second part is an attempt to articulate a modest strategy for the coming year that I think reflects the kind of united action that is possible amongst what I loosely define as the revolutionary anarchist tendency: a focus on anti-racist work. These two sections are a bit disconnected because I haven't fully developed the thoughts I am attempting to express in the first part. This article is still rough around the edges and I would like to hear any comments people have on it.

### 1. Towards a Strategy for Anarchist Revolution

#### Talking About a Revolution

The anarchist movement faces an opportunity to become the most significant revolutionary tendency in North America. The authoritarian left has been dealt a devastating blow by the collapse of the Communist world. At the same time the grinding realities of authoritarian society continue to radicalize people, people who are looking for a way out of this situation. Every day people are coming to revolutionary conclusions about the nature of this society.

There are lots of reasons people don't become anarchists. Perhaps the most important reason is that the anarchist movement in North America has so far failed to pose a credible strategy for achieving our goal of a free society. It is one of the main tasks of the anarchist movement at this point in time to develop a coherent strategy for anarchist revolution: a credible plan for getting from where we are to where we want to be.

The purpose of this article is to look at what are some of the main strategic tendencies in the anarchist movement, to analyse their strengths and weaknesses and to suggest how elements of these tendencies might contribute to a more coherent synthesis. I believe that each of these tendencies has essential elements to offer a more coherent and comprehensive strategy. I also believe that each of these tendencies has major flaws that prevent them from standing alone.

In some respects these strengths and weaknesses are interrelated: the flaws of one tendency have often spurred on the critical development of another tendency. The "lifestylist" features of a lot of counter institutions have pushed forward the development of class struggle anarchist politics. The class reductionism of a lot of syndicalists has compelled some anarchist to take the questions of national liberation more seriously. The vanguardist tendencies of a lot of armed-struggle groups has pushed some people into trying to build a real base of support in various communities by organizing co-ops or squatting buildings.

This dynamic is healthy as long as it pushes forward our understanding of the complexity of developing a coherent strategy for anarchist revolution. It becomes counter-productive when we allow these tendencies to ossify into rigid ideological

categories that people feel compelled to defend. Over time people come to various conclusions about tactics and strategy. Some things work and some things don't and we shouldn't be bashful about saying so. But we must also acknowledge that the anarchist movement we are a part of is relatively small, young and inexperienced: most of our conclusions are based on limited experience and should be viewed as essentially tentative.

### The Main Strategic Tendencies in the Anarchist Movement

There are three main strategic tendencies in the anarchist movement that I think should be taken seriously. Obviously there are great many other currents of thought. Its not that I don't think these currents have important things to say, but that I don't think they even come close to posing a coherent strategy for revolution. There are various reasons for this. Some currents have devoted themselves largely to developing a critique of various other tendencies at the expense of putting forward their own positive plan of action. Other currents are frankly uninterested in "revolution," which is their perogative, but which also puts them outside the scope of this discussion. Others I would not pretend to understand because they strike me as so incoherent that I feel I must be missing something.

The three main tendencies that I would like to address are: what has come to be known as the class struggle tendency that ranges from the young rowdies of Class War to the old syndicalists of the IWW; the advocates of clandestine armed struggle who also tend to be more explicitly anti-imperialist in their analyses, the main expressions of this tendency are two Canadian magazines, Arm the Spirit and Resistance; and finally what I am calling the counter-institutional tendency which is the hardest to pin down and that is involved in projects ranging from back-to-the-land efforts to organizing co-ops and alternative book shops to opening squats.

### Class War and Anarcho-Syndicalism

Perhaps the most prominent tendency in the anarchist movement is the broad tendency known as class struggle anarchism. Class struggle anarchism covers a broad range of tendencies ranging from the classical anarcho-syndicalists of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and the Workers Solidarity Alliance (WSA) to the various groups influenced by England's Class War Federation.

What unites the various class struggle groups is their belief in the central role of the class struggle, that the basic division in society is along class lines, and the need to organize the working class to overthrow the capitalist state. How exactly the working class should be organized and how it should overthrow the state are points of contention that distinguish the various tendencies.

The syndicalists hold up a strategy of organizing revolutionary unions that will eventually grow in strength and attract broad sections of the working class as members. These unions would wage struggles in various workplaces and try to broaden them to other workplaces, eventually leading up to a general strike of all workers. The general strike is the main

revolutionary tactic of the syndicalists who view the power of the workers to deny their labor to the capitalists as the key to overthrowing capitalism.

Class War is a newspaper and organization from England that has influenced a great many younger anarchists in North America with their raw, militant and humorous politics. Class War basically tries to agitate deep feelings of class hatred amongst the working class. They embrace riots, looting and other spontaneous expressions of working class anger as the building blocks of revolution.

The strengths of the class struggle groups are that they seek to develop an overall analysis of society as the foundation for their strategy and that they see building explicitly anarchist organizations now as an essential part of the overall process of the self-organization of oppressed people. Furthermore, they understand that class offers people a way of understanding their many experiences of oppression that tends to unite people.

The main weaknesses of the class struggle groups is that they tend to be class-reductionist and the organizational program they have to offer the anarchist movement is therefore limited. By class-reductionist I mean simply that they tend to reduce complex political questions that involve a myriad of different kinds of oppression to the question of class. Sexism, for example, is seen not as an authoritarian system that has its own logic, but as a tool of the bosses used to divide the workers. As a consequence of this kind of reasoning, attempts by women to organize autonomously around question of their specific oppression as women are often treated as divisive and simplistically denounced as "middle class feminism." The class struggle wing of the anarchist movement often fails to see how "the interests of the working class" are effectively defined by the straight, white, male minority of that class because of the power and privilege that is attached to being straight, white or male in this society.

Similarly, national oppression is often treated as if it doesn't exist. The efforts of colonialized people to win self-determination and expel the armed forces (or puppets) of the imperialist countries is simply denounced as nationalism as if it were comparable to the nationalism of the conquering imperialist countries. The class struggle anarchists tend to call for unity between the working classes of the imperialist countries and the countries under imperialist domination without understanding that no such unity is possible unless the workers in the imperialist countries support the right of the imperialised countries to national self-determination.

#### Armed Struggle and Anti-Imperialism

Another major tendency in the anarchist movement is what I call the "Armed Struggle tendency" that is committed to supporting clandestine armed organizations. This tendency seems to be strongest in Canada and has been represented by a number of Canadian periodicals: Open Road, Resistance, and more recently Arm The Spirit. These periodicals have reported favorably on the actions of a variety of groups that are often denounced in the

capitalist press as "terrorists": the Red Army Fraction, Action Directe, GRAPO, the Ohio 7, Direct Action and others. Because of the intense repression that such groups face, the Armed Struggle tendency does not have any open organized existence. Its positions are expressed implicitly in the positive reportage of various actions and in building support for various prisoners captured by the state.

The two strong points of the Armed Struggle tendency are its commitment to anti-imperialism and its serious appraisal of the repressive power of the state. Generally speaking the Armed Struggle tendency shares a belief that the struggle of oppressed nationalities for self-determination is the main line of struggle against the existing order, that the privileges enjoyed by many white workers stands in the way of them becoming a force for revolutionary change, and that therefore white radicals should take up arms in solidarity with these struggles. A more sophisticated current acknowledges the radical potential of working class whites but upholds armed actions because they demonstrate the vulnerability of the system to attack and undermine its image of invulnerability.

Certainly the struggles of Native peoples, Blacks and other oppressed nationalities for their own liberation will play a pivotal role in any truly anti-authoritarian social revolution in North America. But that does not absolve white activists of the responsibility for building a mass revolutionary movement amongst white people that fights for the liberation of all people.

The other side of the argument for armed struggle now is essentially a repetition of Che Guevera's ill-fated "Foco" theory that a small determined band of guerrillas could make their own social conditions by initiating the armed struggle. This theory is essentially authoritarian and supported only by the most self-serving interpretation of the events of the Cuban revolution (i.e. that it was made by the guerrillas independent of the autonomous activity of Cuban workers and peasants). It is a very seductive strategy for serious militants who are frustrated by the absence of a serious revolutionary mass movement. Of course audacious armed actions can change social conditions by confronting the powers that be with a political crisis as their inability to impose order is exposed. But whether or not such a crisis will give rise to the general empowerment of ordinary people depends far more on an orientation towards building a mass movement than the clandestine actions of a small armed minority.

None of this is meant to write off the need to eventually militarily defeat the state. But we need to remember that "war is the health of the state" and the statist tendencies of military organizations have been historically overwhelming. A coherent anarchist military strategy must be based first in the arming of the people and the subordination of any specialized military structures to the mass movement. That is not to say that the revolutionary movement will never want to carry out clandestine actions or organize a clandestine armed wing, but rather that such actions must be based in a movement that is ready and able to support and defend such actions and to which such actions can be reasonably made accountable. There is a hell of a lot more to "the armed struggle" than urban guerillas blowing up corporate

and government targets. Far more important, from an anti-authoritarian perspective, should be organized resistance within the armed forces of the state and the organization of militias and other structures for self-defense by workers, women or other oppressed groups.

In contrast to the syndicalists who sometimes seem to believe that if the workers just seize the means of production in a general strike the armed power of the state will simply crumble without bloodshed, the Armed Struggle tendency is more realistic about the nature of our enemy the state. The Armed Struggle tendency understands that the fight against the system will involve setbacks and mistakes that will leave us vulnerable unless we build serious and secure organizations. That is to say that there will be lots of times we will take actions that leave us exposed to repression because we misjudge the level of popular support they will find. The state will take advantage of these situations to attack us. Furthermore the state is constantly engaged in efforts to spy on and disrupt our activities, and, when they think it's necessary, to murder or imprison us.

The Armed Struggle tendency also represents the most militant wing of the anarchist movement, it unites many of those who understand the need to build a scure fighting movement that is able to actually defeat the armed power of the state.

#### Counter Institutions and Dual Power

A third tendency that I see as a significant strategic current in the anarchist movement is what I call the "Counter Institutional tendency." This tendency is considerably more amorphous and wide ranging than the other two. It includes people who consciously see building "counter institutions" as a strategy for revolution and people who have gravitated towards such activity instinctively and generally uncritically.

Counter institutions can be co-ops and collectives, squats, publishing projects, record distribution projects, communes and all sorts of other projects. They are practical projects that can be organized, either legally or otherwise, today under existing conditions. When such projects are informed by a conscious strategy for revolution it generally runs as follows: The counter institution offers powerless people an opportunity for self-empowerment and thereby creates a "liberated zone" of sorts that can be expanded by enlarging the counter institution or by building new counter institutions.

The grand conception of the counter institution is that at some point it can challenge the authority of the state because it constitutes an effective form of "dual power" that gives people the opportunity to shift their allegiances from the state to more liberatory structures. Some advocates of counter institutions see them as slowly but surely nibbling away at the power of the state until it becomes impotent and irrelevant without any direct confrontation. Others see the counter institutions as eventually coming under attack, but, because they give people something meaningful to defend, they become the starting point for a struggle against the state that can hope to win.

The strength of the counter institutional tendency is that it has built real projects that have the real support of various

communities. Unlike the Class Struggle and Armed Struggle tendencies which are essentially betting on the future viability of their strategies the Counter Institutional tendency can point to real co-ops, real alternative community newspapers, and real squats as evidence of its relevance.

The big weakness of the counter institutional tendency is that it often underestimates the capacity of the system to coopt or recuperate challenges to its authority of this sort. Also because building counter institutions under existing conditions often proves to be too difficult there is tendency towards "lifestylism": the idea that by "living right" (eating the right foods, wearing the right clothes, working the right jobs) individuals can erode the power of authoritarian institutions incrementally. Even when counter institutions "succeed" they tend to become de-politicized, and individual "lifestyle" decisions are substituted for organizing on a mass scale. Also counter institutions often tend to gloss over very real division of class, gender, nationality, sexuality and age that exist in society in order to view themselves as successful. So a co-op grocery that is run by white people and serves white people even though it is located in an African American city or neighborhood judges itself by a standard that focuses on its internal structure without seeing the authoritarian (white supremacist) nature of its relationship with the Black community.

### Towards a Strategy

A coherent strategy for anarchist revolution can not be based on any single one of the three tendencies outlined above. The development of a strategy should begin by trying to synthesize the positive elements of the various tendencies and to discard the negative elements. That of course is only a beginning. We need to constantly be reevaluating our strategy as we test it in practice and as we encounter other strategic visions. The three broad tendencies I've outlined here are by no means exhaustive, and I am sure many will disagree with specific elements of my analysis. What I think is essential is that we discuss the question of strategy in a non-dogmatic way by acknowledging that so far nothing has really worked to build a mass revolutionary anarchist movement that can seriously challenge the existing order.

I think that we need a strategy that recognizes that there are a number of intersecting systems of oppression and that it is nonsensical to try to understand the struggle against the totality of oppression through one the prism of one division (whether it is class, gender, nationality or whatever). At the same time we need to try to understand precisely how these systems intersect so that we can try to build movements that tend to unite people against common enemies instead of dividing them against each other. Counter institutions, workers organizations and groups carrying out clandestine direct action all have their place in any comprehensive strategic vision, as do many other forms. But that doesn't mean all things are equal and all tactics are equally valuable under all circumstances.

A coherent strategy needs to begin with a coherent analysis of the nature of the society we live in, its specific features

and how they came to be. What is the class make up of North America? How has the conquest of Indian lands and the enslavement of Africans shaped authoritarian social structures in North America? How does the role of the US as the dominant super power on Earth affect class and other social divisions in North America? How will changes in that status affect those divisions? What social groups have the least or most to lose by overthrowing the existing system? What groups have the knowledge and experience to credibly challenge the existing system? What popular ideas stand in the way of people seeing the possibility or desirability of an anarchist revolution? What social groups does the anarchist movement currently draw most of its support from? Why? How does that need to change?

In choosing tactics we need to be aware of the dynamic tension that exists between actions that can attract broad popular support and actions that attract the interest, and hopefully support, of those people who, at this time are most likely to be active or are most likely to view themselves as radicals or revolutionaries. There is a basic tension between actions that challenge the status quo in ways that it hasn't been challenged before and actions that the largest possible number of people will feel comfortable participating in. To engage only in the most militant actions will tend to isolate us from the real lives of most people, while only carrying out the safest actions will mean capitulating to the status quo. A revolutionary strategy needs to be conscious of both the need to raise the level of militancy and the need to consolidate popular support for radical ideas.

These are only the most general comments about what is needed to formulate a strategy. Developing a strategy is a practical question. A strategy is meaningless if you can't convince people to carry it out. During the 1970s lots of Marxist groups directed their members into various industries to organize the workers. This strategy had its strengths and weaknesses. But such a strategy would be ridiculous for the anarchist movement to embrace at this time, not because workplace organizing is wrong, but because most serious anarchist activists wouldn't do it. A strategy needs to unite people by promoting a course of action that people will be willing and able to take up.

At the present there is probably no single course of action that can unite the diverse group of people who can be broadly defined as revolutionary anarchists. Under such conditions "the strategy" needs to be building projects that develop communications and trust between different groups and individuals to the point that they can collectively formulate a common strategy. At the same time it is important to try to develop a common focus that is inclusive of a broad range of actions so that we can coherently discuss our points of agreement and our differences. From November on, Love and Rage focused on the war in the Persian Gulf. We reported on actions that took place and opened the pages of the paper to a discussion of how anarchists should relate to the anti-war movement. By choosing to focus on a single issue we were able to maximize our impact. We organized a contingent to the January 26 March on Washington that was the most militant section of that action.

## 2. Elements of a Strategy

A strategy combines a general analysis of the situation we face with a tactical program: suggested actions to bring us closer to our goal. I would maintain that while the overall conditions that confront us make a great many people receptive to revolutionary and anti-authoritarian ideas, the anarchist movement is suffering from several weaknesses that stand in the way of reaching those people. I believe that we should focus our energies on struggles that tend to correct those weaknesses.

The anarchist movement in North America is currently largely young, white and middle class. It is disproportionately male in many areas but in other areas that has changed considerably. I think the popularity of anarchist ideas amongst youth is a very good thing. Most people who become radicalized do so when they are relatively young. While middle class values are very prevalent in the anarchist movement there is a significant section of the movement that comes from the working class. Additionally there is a section of the movement that clearly identifies the working class as its main focus, admittedly with no big organizational successes.

What I see as the potentially fatal weakness in the anarchist movement is its almost all-white composition, and worse its largely uncritical view of this state of affairs. The separation of white radicals from communities of color is, in my opinion, the main reason there is not a significant radical movement in the US and Canada. The main reason for that separation is, I believe, the unconscious white chauvinism of most white radicals. This is just as true of the anarchist movement as it is of any other radical current.

Often when largely white radical groups recognize that their composition is a problem they set out to recruit people of color. I certainly support the creation of authentically multi-nationality anarchist groups (I am referring here to various communities of color as "nationalities" instead of as "races" because I believe that is more accurate term), but I think such groups can't simply be built by trying to recruit people of color. Historically the tendency of such recruitment efforts has been to reproduce the colonial relations between white people and people of color within the group. Authentic multi-nationality groups must be built on a principle of respect for the self-organization and self-determination of the oppressed nationalities within the group.

The key to eventually creating a multi-nationality anarchist movement in North America is for white anarchists to seriously take up the fight against racism. Racism is constantly exploding as a major issue in practically every community in the US and Canada: the police routinely brutalize people of color, racist skinheads and other white supremacist groups are growing, Native peoples and Chicanos are involved in various land disputes. Anarchists should be taking up these struggles everywhere.

Right now the potential for an orientation towards anti-racist work is immense. Anarchists have played an important role in building Anti-Racist Action (ARA) groups around the US and anarchists could launch ARA groups in a lot of cities where there

are really no established anti-racist groups in place. The past several years has seen the growth of racist skinhead activity and racist actions on many college campuses. These developments have pushed many new people into anti-racist activity. It seems very likely that the Presidential election campaign in 1992 will focus on racial issues as George Bush seeks to exploit white opposition to affirmative action. Anarchists should take up anti-racist work now so that we are in a position to respond to the events that will accompany such a campaign.

There are a number of practical activities that I see as potential facets of a focus on anti-racist work: a speaking tour by anarchist anti-racist organizers, a study program on racism and the liberation movements of oppressed nationalities in North America, using the pages of Love and Rage to focus on anti-racist organizing and on a discussion of issues of race and nationality from an anarchist perspective.

In conclusion I think it is important to understand that choosing to focus on anti-racism doesn't mean abandoning our commitment to other work. It means deciding to focus on a particular area of work for the coming year as a way of developing our common politics. The degree to which people take up anti-racist work will often reflect local conditions and commitments that people feel they have already made to other struggles. It is important to understand that most every struggle we join in will at some point or another intersect with issues of racism and that by focusing on racism we will all be better able to address those situations as they arise.

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